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ABSTRACT

In this day of increased competition for students, educators need to know what makes their institution exceptional or how it is perceived as providing something of value that other institutions in the local area do not. Without this information, community colleges will find it difficult to thrive and adapt in the future. Efforts to determine the existence, nature, and strength of an institution's unique aspects must consider both empirical and perceptual dimensions of distinction. The college needs to identify its unique programs, services, and characteristics, and also compare the image that the college projects to the outside world with the perceptions held by internal constituents. The search for institutional distinctiveness can be accomplished by either a college committee or a consultant, with both approaches offering advantages and disadvantages. When integrated with strategic planning and decision-making processes, the results of such a search can contribute to the creation of a vision of the institution that can be shared by all members of the college community, to the development and communication of a positive institutional image, and eventually, to the development of institutional integrity. (AJL)

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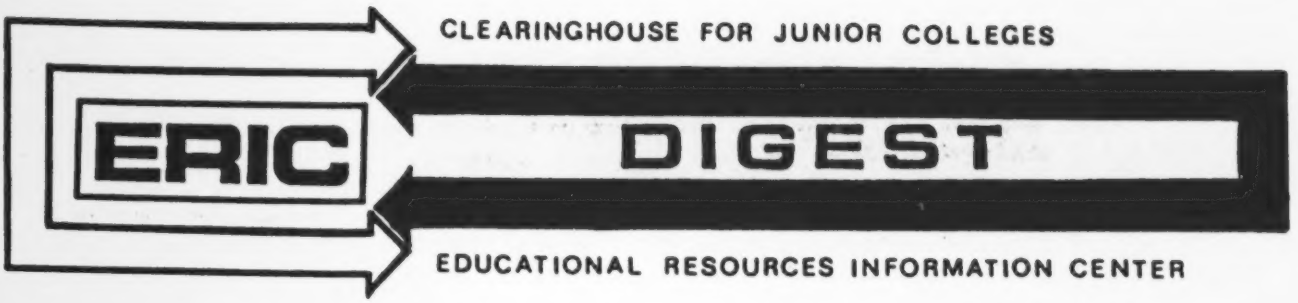

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CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

ERIC DIGEST

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER

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Jennifer Curry

Community colleges play a distinct role in higher education. Their open admissions policies, low cost, and the great variety of programs available contribute to the unique status held by community colleges across the nation. The role they assume within local areas and regions, however, depends a great deal on their ability to set their programs and services apart from those offered by all other postsecondary institutions in the area. The ideal is an institution that is perceived as offering something of value that other institutions in the local area or service region do not.

As Townsend (1989) points out, all colleges offer academic programs. In order for a community college to be distinctive in this regard, it must offer programs that other institutions in the area do not or that differ in emphasis or structure from other colleges' programs with the same name. All colleges also have faculty. For a community college to establish an identity based on its faculty, there must be a measurable or a perceived difference in the nature of the interaction between faculty and their students.

This digest will discuss reasons a community college should evaluate and emphasize its distinctiveness, how to go about making such determinations, and what to do with the knowledge.

Why Evaluate Institutional Distinctiveness

In this day of increased competition for students, the features that distinguish colleges from each other can be their strongest marketing points. Historical development, educational purpose, and student body are just a few of the factors that differentiate community colleges from four-year institutions and each other. As community colleges fulfill their individual missions by responding specifically to the needs of their community, programs,

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services, and delivery systems can also establish the distinctiveness of community colleges (Hankin, 1989).

While the results of a search for institutional distinctiveness can serve as the basis for marketing strategies, the process of discovering an institution's unique characteristics itself uncovers new possibilities. As leaders choose to develop and build upon what they have learned, they can create an institution with an identity distinct from other community colleges and four-year institutions. The search can open up new opportunities for educators to learn about their college's strengths and weaknesses, and discover or develop its niche in the higher education system. The process can also have the effect of increasing the morale of the institution's members, while at the same time improving its image within the community.

It is essential to know what makes one's institution exceptional in today's changing world, and investigating current programs and policies is a start. In fact, without clear answers to questions of what a community college does, what it should be doing, and what is unique about it, some researchers believe that community colleges will find it difficult to thrive and adapt in the future (Templin, 1989). Ratcliff (1989) goes farther in saying that "rapid social, economic, and technological changes demand effective responses and educational leadership from community colleges. Only with valid, reliable and convincing information can the case for distinctiveness of mission and function be made."

How to Conduct a Search for Institutional Distinctiveness

A first step in the search is to examine the image that the community college projects to the outside world. How is this image communicated both internally and externally? The synthesis of the perceptions of the faculty, staff, and students of a college and the perceptions of the surrounding community creates the identity of the college.

Focus. Efforts to determine the nature, existence, and strength of an institutions's unique aspects must consider both empirical and perceptual dimensions of distinction. It is possible to demonstrate empirically, for example, that a program is offered in no other school in the region. While this sort of tangible evidence is valuable in establishing the unique identity of a college, perceptions that are not supported by data are equally important. If the public believes that students will receive more individual attention from a more caring faculty at a particular community college, this perception becomes an important part of the institution's identity. Once identified, these perceptions can be developed into empirically distinctive elements.

Methodology. The process of investigating a community college's potential for distinctiveness involves searching for empirically distinctive programs, ascertaining the perceptions of internal constituents about the institution, and checking those perceptions with external constituents. While looking for unique programs may be simpler and less time consuming than determining internal and external perceptions of programs and services, both are critical in the search for distinctiveness.

Information about internal and external perceptions of the college can be found in a variety of sources, including articles in local newspapers, speeches by college officials and community leaders, letters from former students, correspondence from administrators at other colleges, and reports by state agencies for two-year college education. Ratcliff (1989) advocates the formulation of an overall view of what makes the college distinctive through an analysis of:

- o Institutional histories;
- o Needs assessments;
- o Institutional impact studies;
- o Marketing research; and
- o Strategic planning studies.

The combination of these institutional descriptors paints a usable picture of institutional distinctiveness.

Quanty (1989) considers the advantages and disadvantages of two different ways of approaching the search for distinctiveness: 1) appointing a college committee and 2) hiring an outside consultant to explore the issues.

College Committee. An internal council is naturally more familiar with the workings of the institution and members contribute the value of their different views and experience to the process. A drawback with this approach, however, is that the committee may have only a limited knowledge of other higher education institutions and thus be unable to make the necessary comparisons to discover what is actually unique in the institution.

Consultant. An outside observer brings a fresh perspective to the search for distinctiveness and has the knowledge necessary to make comparisons with other institutions. A consultant, however, lacks the inside information that is often crucial to understanding the inner workings of an institution. Providing background information and having resources available for the consultant can minimize this problem. A consultant's report should not be viewed as the end of a search for distinctiveness, but merely as a starting place in the process of developing a clear identity.

What to Do with the Results

While the process of undergoing a search for distinctiveness is in itself worthwhile, effectively translating the results into action is the obvious goal. Templin (1989) suggests that a community college can best utilize the research on institutional distinctiveness when it is related to the college's particular stage of organizational development. For a college facing enrollment declines and staff and program retrenchment, the principle objective will be to identify the defining institutional characteristics that make the college needed within the community. An institution with secure funding, stable enrollments, and a well-defined mission can begin to build a reputation based upon identified strengths.

Research findings about institutional distinctiveness can be applied most profitably when integrated with strategic planning and decision-making processes. At this point, the results may contribute to the creation of a vision of the institution that can be shared by all members of the college community, to the development and communication of a positive institutional image, to efforts to establish the interrelationships among college programs, and, eventually, to the development of institutional integrity.

Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that institutional distinctiveness is only one part of a community college's identity. Templin (1989, p. 60) points out that "it is only within the broader context of a college's organizational development, its mission and goals, and strategic planning processes that institutional distinctiveness takes on its full meaning." As community colleges grow away from the notion of being everything for everyone, finding their own niche in the system of higher education becomes increasingly important. The discovery of what sets one college apart from the others will ensure survival into the twenty-first century.

This digest highlights some of the topics explored in greater depth in New Directions for Community Colleges, Number 65, A Search for Institutional Distinctiveness. This collection of essays, edited by Barbara Townsend, will be published by Jossey-Bass in the spring of 1989.

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